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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HARARE 002087

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ASEC](#) [ZI](#)

SUBJECT: NATIONWIDE LOCAL ELECTIONS A DEMOCRATIC CHARADE

Classified By: political section chief Matt Harrington. Reasons: 1.5 (B) and (D).

[11](#). (U) Action request -- see para 10.

Summary

[12](#). (C) Nationwide rural council elections are scheduled for September 28-29, and the Government of Zimbabwe has used all the means at its disposal to block genuine competition from the opposition MDC. Aspiring MDC candidates have been arrested on frivolous charges, assaulted, forced to flee their residences, and subjected to unfair nomination requirements. As a result, the MDC has been able to field only 646 candidates for more than 1400 contested seats. The MDC is seeking a judicial order to delay the elections, citing the widespread physical abuse and procedural manipulation. The government has used every trick in the book to block nomination of MDC candidates, while claiming in its media mouthpieces that the MDC's failure to nominate candidates is evidence of the party's declining popularity. This outrageous process has descended to the level of low farce, and the Department may wish to consider issuing a statement critical of the Government's ongoing efforts to subvert democracy so brazenly. End Summary.

Local council elections -- when, what, and where

[13](#). (U) Elections for 1438 rural council seats nationwide will be held September 28-29. Rural councils do not have a great deal of authority in Zimbabwe's centralized system of governance. They do collect some funds via assessment of "development levies" and manage small amounts of resources at the local level. The primary significance of the elections, however, is the political message that will be sent by the outcome. The ruling party is determined to demonstrate that it continues to have rural areas locked down. For its part, the MDC will want to show some penetration of ZANU-PF's traditional geographic stronghold.

Violence and harrassment

[14](#). (U) According to a September 3 press statement issued by MDC Elections Director Paul Themba-Nyathi, more than 20 aspiring MDC councillors have been "assaulted, harassed, and tortured" in the run-up to the council elections. In one incident, the party's deputy organizing secretary for Midlands South, Anthony Chamahwinya, was hospitalized after a severe beating at the hands of ZANU-PF supporters on September 1. At the time of the attack, Chamahwinya reportedly was distributing nomination papers for his party's prospective candidates. An MDC candidate in Mount Darwin south, in Mashonaland Central province, was abducted by alleged members of ZANU-PF's youth militia and has not been seen since. Some candidates have withdrawn from the race in the face of such intimidation, understandably fearing for their lives. 36 candidates in Midlands South have pulled out, while 10 have abandoned races in Masvingo province. In addition, according to Themba-Nyathi, more than 70 MDC candidates and key party officials involved in the campaign have been arrested on trumped-up charges, mostly in Manicaland and Mashonaland Central provinces. An unspecified number of candidates and party officials have been forced to flee their homes, while those who have braved the threats of violence are finding it difficult, if not impossible, to campaign openly. According to press reports, 63 MDC candidates in Manicaland have withdrawn from the race, citing assaults and intimidation.

Nomination skulduggery

[15](#). (U) Election officials have also erected significant obstacles in the candidate registration process itself. Large numbers of MDC candidates have been disqualified on frivolous grounds, after they failed to present supporting documentation not required by Zimbabwean law. (The "Rural District Councils Act" requires only that candidates prove they are Zimbabwean citizens, registered voters, and residents of the ward in which they are running.) The most common tactic was to demand presentation of long birth certificates on September 5, the national day of nomination.

Most Zimbabweans have a short-form birth certificate, and it takes several weeks to coax the longer, more detailed version out of the Registrar-General's office. ZANU-PF candidates either were given adequate advance notice of this requirement or were not asked to comply. In other cases, election officials demanded proof of tax payments, while access to the nomination court was blocked by war veterans and ZANU-PF supporters in several other instances. Many nomination centers were moved from government offices to police stations, an effective intimidatory tactic given the role of the police in suppressing MDC supporters. (Comment: As the economy continues to decline and ZANU-PF's popularity erodes, the ruling party might use this tactic in future elections, simply manufacturing reasons to prevent the placement of MDC candidates on the ballot. End Comment.)

Government spin

16. (U) The ruling party's comprehensive "campaign" efforts have succeeded in ensuring that the MDC has been able to field candidates for only 646 seats, less than half the number being contested. The Government-controlled media have, without any apparent sense of shame, heralded this development as a sign of the MDC's imminent demise.

To boycott or not to boycott

17. (C) Some observers have urged the MDC to boycott the election, contending that the party's participation merely lends legitimacy to a deeply flawed process. The entire party leadership, however, appears determined to go forward, no matter how flawed the process. MDC Secretary-General Welshman Ncube told us the national executive had discussed the possibility of a boycott, but had decided in the end that the party owed it to those supporters and candidates who have put their lives on the line to participate. The party's national elections coordinator insisted to us that a boycott was never seriously considered, and that participating demonstrates the party's commitment to achieving change through democratic means. Political analyst John Makumbe said he had advised the MDC not to waste too much time and resources campaigning, but that contesting was important because the party had to "keep the fire burning." David Coltart, a Member of Parliament and the MDC's Shadow Justice Minister, told us that the party is seeking a delay of the elections in the High Court, citing the array of irregularities to date, but he was not optimistic of a favorable ruling.

Plans for Observation

18. (C) The Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN), a coalition of NGOs committed to guaranteeing the integrity of elections, plans to deploy observers for the rural council elections. It has applied to the GOZ-appointed Electoral Supervisory Commission for accreditation of 5,000 observers, but expects to receive approval for only half that number, and at the very last minute. Asked where he would recommend the Embassy send observers, ZESN Chairman Reginald Matchaba-Hove suggested Matabeleland, Manicaland, and Midlands, saying those provinces were the only ones in which the MDC had been able to field significant numbers of candidates.

Comment

19. (C) These elections are little more than a charade, as the ruling party has used almost every trick in the book to tilt the process overwhelmingly in its favor. (The GOZ has clearly come to the conclusion that giving voters a choice when food supplies are dwindling might not produce a pleasing result.) For that reason, we have no plans to mount a significant in-house observation effort, but likely will send several Embassy officers to cover constituencies that appear to be up-for-grabs. We agree that the MDC ought to participate where it can, so that it continues to be perceived as a credible democratic alternative to an increasingly unpopular regime and because it stands the chance of picking up some seats in rural areas, particularly the MDC's stronghold of Matabeleland. The MDC can portray any inroads it makes into rural areas, no matter how small, as evidence of expanding popular appeal.

Action request

10. (C) Preparations for the rural council elections have gotten virtually no coverage from the international media, and the GOZ has taken advantage of this lack of scrutiny to make a mockery of the democratic process. Shining the international spotlight on the violence and irregularities associated with the local elections could restrain some of the worst excesses by GOZ supporters and give cover to voters

inclined to cast ballots for the MDC but who are currently scared to do so. We recommend the Department:

--consider issuing a public statement now expressing serious concern about the violence, intimidation, and range of irregularities witnessed to date, and urging the GOZ to facilitate the registration of all interested candidates. We might want to tie a refusal to address our concerns to expansion of targeted sanctions, such as an announcement of asset seizure;

--encourage regional governments to weigh in with the GOZ, stressing the importance of holding an election that is consistent with the SADC norms and standards;

--issue a final statement after the election providing a judgment on whether it was free and fair. Such an assessment, of course, will depend on whether the environment continues to be as destructive as it is now, and on the outcome.

SULLIVAN